Suicide Prevention

Employer/Supervisor Perspective

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George had worked for Ralph for almost 7 years...

While they had not become good friends during that time, they were on good terms. Recently, Ralph noticed that George had changed. George had always kept to himself, but lately he seemed to avoid everyone as much as possible. He stopped eating in the lunchroom and ate by himself in the park across the street. He was becoming uncharacteristically abrupt with customers. And he looked sad all the time. On a number of occasions, George looked like he had been crying, but Ralph felt like he would be intruding if he asked George about this. Instead, he asked June, another long-term employee whose judgment and discretion he trusted, if she thought anything was wrong with George. She seemed relieved that someone else had noticed and confirmed all of Ralph's observations. She also said that George had told her that he had been "really upset about stuff going on in his life" and "didn't know if he could go on like this." Ralph didn't know what to do. He was concerned, but was not sure if this was really his business. The next day he saw George crying in the stockroom. He was determined to at least ask George if there was something that he could do to help. He mentioned this to his wife, who found a suicide prevention hotline number on the Internet and gave it to Ralph, suggesting that Ralph might want to give it to George when they spoke.

The Role of Employers in Preventing Suicide

Suspecting that an employee is considering ending his or her life can be frightening and confusing. You may not know when you should become involved in the problems of someone who is not a family member or close friend. You may be unsure of what you can really do to help someone with emotional difficulties or feel uncertain whether that person is actually in serious trouble. Being wrong could be embarrassing. But being right could save a life. This publication will help you recognize and assist an employee who may be considering suicide.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

Each year, more than 30,000 Americans take their own lives. An additional 500,000 Americans visit emergency rooms for injuries related to suicide attempts. A large number of suicides and suicide attempts are related to treatable emotional conditions including depression and other mood disorders as well as alcohol and drug abuse. People may be embarrassed by those problems or fear that public disclosure will hurt their careers - although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination in employment because of mental impairment.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

People who are in danger of suicide often display warning signs. You may be in a good position to recognize such signs in your employees - even if they are trying to conceal their problems. You see your employees on a regular basis and know how they talk, act, behave, and react to stress in the workplace. You can recognize changes in their behavior, personality, or mood. Such changes may be the proverbial "cry for help." Signs that a crisis is imminent can include:

- Talking about suicide or death
- Making statements like "I wish I were dead." and "I'm going to end it all."
- Less direct verbal cues, including "What's the point of living?" "Soon you won't have to worry about me" and "Who cares if I'm dead, anyway?"
- Uncharacteristically isolating themselves from others in the workplace
- Expressing feelings that life is meaningless or hopeless
- Giving away cherished possessions
- A sudden and unexplained improvement in mood after being depressed or withdrawn
- Neglect of appearance and hygiene
- Sudden unexplained deterioration of work performance or productivity

Responding to the Warning Signs

You should respond to warning signs that an employee may be thinking of suicide. If you are comfortable speaking with this person, you should ask the difficult questions that can help you understand that person's state-of-mind and intentions. Don't be afraid to approach the issue directly and just ask: "Are you thinking of killing yourself?" or "Do you feel like you want to die?" If their response gives you any indication that they have been considering suicide or having suicidal thoughts, ask them to find help immediately. Offer to call your company's employee assistance program (EAP) and help them make an appointment with a counselor. You can also suggest that they call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The Lifeline provides crisis counseling and referrals 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Responding to the Warning Signs

Some of your employees may be your personal friends. You may maintain a more professional relationship with others. And some of your work relationships may be strained or even antagonistic. If your relationship with an employee who may be thinking about suicide is such that you do not feel he or she will talk to you about these issues, express your concern to someone else - perhaps another employee who is friendly with that person or a member of the human resources department or EAP (if you have one). But as an owner or manager, you cannot delegate or assign responsibility to employees to help one another with emotional issues.

Responding to the Warning Signs

If you think a person is in immediate danger, do not leave him or her alone until you have found help. This may require mobilizing other employees or the person's friends or family. If your employee is unwilling to seek help or is uncooperative or combative, call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you "is a danger to themselves," or "they cannot take care of themselves." These phrases will alert the dispatcher that there is an immediate threat. Do not hesitate to make such a call if you suspect someone may be on the verge of harming him or herself.

If A Suicide Happens

   The suicide of an employee - even if it does not occur on the job - can have a profound emotional effect on the workplace. Owners, managers, and co-workers may struggle with guilt and unanswered questions. Some people may experience depression or suicidal thoughts after such an experience. Many EAPs or private mental health professionals offer grief counseling or "postvention" services for these situations. For additional information on helping yourself and others recover from such a trauma, see the Survivors publication. (http://www.sprc.org/featured_resources/customized/survivors.asp) in this series.

Seeking Professional Help

The emotional problems associated with suicide - including depression, bipolar disorder, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs - are difficult conditions requiring professional intervention. One of the most important things you can do for an employee who may be considering suicide is help him or her find professional help. Larger companies which have access to a human resources department or an **employee assistance program** have an advantage in locating such help. You do have some control over the work environment. If your employee tells you that conditions in the workplace - perhaps stress or conflicts with other employees - are contributing to their depression or suicidal feelings, take action to fix this problem or relieve this stress -without violating the employees' right of confidentiality regarding his or her mental condition.

General Resources on Suicide and Suicide Prevention

- **If you are thinking about suicide or hurting yourself, or if you think someone you know is seriously thinking about suicide, please talk to a responsible adult or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). This telephone hotline is available 24/7. The people who answer this hotline will help you.**

- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)**
  http://www.sprc.org/
  SPRC provides prevention support, training, and materials to strengthen suicide prevention efforts. Among the resources found on its website is the SPRC Library Catalog (http://library.sprc.org/), a searchable database containing a wealth of information on suicide and suicide prevention, including publications, peer-reviewed research studies, curricula, and web-based resources. Many of these items are available online.